

# Guide to Narrative Writing

Matthew Williams • English Language • April 25, 2026

## Purpose

Narrative writing is storytelling. Section C of CSEC English A Paper 2 gives you a stimulus — usually a photo, a phrase you must include, or a scenario — and asks you to write a short story around it. You have 45 minutes.

Markers are looking at four things: how well you used the stimulus, how developed and organised your story is, whether your language fits the tone and audience, and whether your writing is technically clean. Grammar, sentence structure, paragraphs, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation all count.

### Exam Tip

The suggested length is 400–450 words, but going over won't cost you marks. The CXC award winner annotated below is over 700 words. The real standard is whether every sentence is doing something — a longer story that stays purposeful beats a shorter one that's been padded to hit a count.

## Story Structure

Most effective short stories follow a five-stage arc known as **Freytag's Pyramid**. Understanding this structure lets you write with intention — building tension deliberately rather than stringing events together at random.

Stage	What it does	Key advice
Exposition	Introduces characters, setting, and tone	Don't over-explain — weave details in as the story moves
Rising Action	Develops the conflict; tension escalates	This is the longest stage — each obstacle should raise the stakes
Climax	The highest point of tension; the turning point	Something irreversible happens — a decision, confrontation, or reveal
Falling Action	Deals with the consequences of the climax	Prevents the ending from feeling abrupt
Resolution	Ties up loose ends; shows the final outcome	Can be hopeful, tragic, or open-ended

The inciting incident — the single event that kicks the conflict into motion — ends the exposition and launches the rising action. If your story feels random or flat, it is usually because one of these stages is weak or missing.

## How to Open Your Story

Your opening is the first thing the examiner reads. A weak opener signals a weak story. Avoid predictable beginnings like "One sunny morning I got out of bed..." and start instead with one of these four techniques:

- **Dialogue** — Drop the reader into a conversation already in progress.

"Patricia, what time did you go to bed? You look like a raccoon," my mother exclaimed.

- **Description** — Use sensory details to place the reader in the scene immediately.

I woke up to the sound of clanging pots and pans... the smell of my mother's strong coffee filled the air.

- **Proverb or saying** — Open with a line that frames the story's theme.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," I reminded myself as I stood at the gate.

- **Action** — Begin mid-event to create immediate momentum.

I bolted out of my front door and jumped into my brother's car.

You can also combine these. A line of action followed by sharp dialogue, for example, creates both energy and character voice from the first sentence.

## Annotated Examples

The stories below are annotated to show how each technique works in practice. Click any highlighted passage to see what the writer is doing and why it works.

### A Miner's Story — 2011

[Code: annotated-example]

[Exposition] The opening establishes the setting as actively hostile before a single character appears. Nature itself is the antagonist – "hellish hatred" and "demonic grudge" are personification, not just decoration. The detail about half the team already dead raises the stakes before we even meet the protagonist.

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[[The gold bearing plateau of the Guiana Shield is every miner's destination. But many times, it is also their doom. The rainforest holds a hellish hatred, a demonic grudge against all intruders, and batters them, strangles them, and eventually, destroys them. Amazonia is no place for man, and here, nature reigns supreme. |Exposition| Nature is personified as an active antagonist – it doesn't just exist, it hates and destroys. Establishing this before any character appears makes the setting itself a source of conflict.]]

[[The men trudged through the mud, in the sunken crater, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. All around them were trees, in excess of fifty metres high, ferns, creepers, moss and lianas. The world of vegetation was grey-green, alien to mankind, as the early morning fog hung low among the ferns. This team was here, for gold, but man cannot tame nature. All of them, faces haggard and mud-streaked, clothes torn with dried blood in dark spots, their rifles and digging tools already rusting with moisture were on death row. They had a fouled compass, no medicine, and half of the original eight-man team was lost; dead, in the middle of nowhere. |Exposition| Concrete sensory details (grey-green vegetation, rusting tools, dried blood) ground the reader in a specific oppressive place. The inventory of what they've lost – compass, medicine, four men – makes their situation feel measured and real, not melodramatic.]]

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[Exposition] Two characters, two techniques: Carl is introduced through internal contradiction; Lewis through physical caricature. Notice neither is explained – the writer shows rather than tells.

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[[Carl Royston shook his head, cursed under his breath. He was a young miner from one of the villages in the mountains, but he looked twice as old as he was now, as the men lethargically stumbled through the perpetual gloom in the barely penetrable rainforest. |Exposition| The age paradox – young in years, looking twice his age – conveys the physical cost of the journey without a word of backstory. "Lethargically stumbled" extends the exhaustion from Carl to the whole group.]] [[He glanced at Lewis, his number one rival. |Rising Action| The glance is charged – Carl registers his rival before anyone else. This one sentence plants the antagonism that will eventually save his life.]] [[Lewis was a big, burly, bearded buffalo of a man. Lewis stared at him, scowled as they moved deeper into the bowels of the forest. Carl hated Lewis with all his heart, for reasons he chose not to remember. Now they were together, members of the same team in the heathen jungle. |Rising Action| The string of alliterative B-words ("big, burly, bearded buffalo") makes Lewis imposing and slightly comic at once. "For reasons he chose not to remember" hints at backstory without ever stating it – a deliberate withholding that keeps the reader curious.]]

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[Rising Action] Two pressures converge: an external threat (the rapids) and an internal one (Carl's fever). The writer compounds danger rather than introducing it one at a time.

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[[["Hold up, rapids," was the call from Mason, up ahead.|Rising Action|Mason's voice introduces the obstacle before we see it – the announcement comes first, then the description. This ordering mirrors how the men encounter danger: warning, then confrontation.]] [[A cascading torrent was before them, foaming white water thundering around jagged black rocks on the riverbed.|Rising Action|Sound and image combine – "thundering," "foaming," "jagged" – to make the obstacle immediate before any character reacts to it.]] [[Funny, he hadn't heard it before. Carl brushed it aside. He had a fever anyway. The rapids sounded as if the floodgates of God had opened, especially from so close. "It's okay, boys," Mason, the American prospector said. "We're crossing in a minute."|Rising Action|Carl's dismissal of his own fever – "brushed it aside" – signals dangerous denial. Mason's flat reassurance accelerates the pace; there is no deliberation, only forward motion into danger.]]

[[Carl hated Mason's accent. Why couldn't he speak like the rest of them? He stepped closer, to the edge of the water.|Rising Action|Internal friction – Carl's irritability mirrors his own deteriorating state. The step closer to the water's edge is both literal and symbolic: he is moving toward the thing that will nearly destroy him.]] [[From here, it sounded like a bullet-train tearing through a tunnel at three hundred miles per hour.|Rising Action|A modern, kinetic simile dropped into a jungle setting. The contrast between the technology of the simile and the primitive danger of the situation makes the scale of the rapids land harder.]] [[He stared across the water that swirled with unearthly gyrations, to the opposite bank. Fifty feet of raging water, from bank to bank.|Rising Action|The specificity of "fifty feet" makes the crossing feel measured and daunting – not a vague torrent but a calculable distance that must be crossed.]] [[His head hurt, and everything swam before his eyes for a while, and he felt nauseous. The tumult didn't help much, and he staggered.|Rising Action|Carl's fever and stagger quietly signal that he will need saving – planting the setup for the climax before the reader sees it coming.]]

[[["You okay?" Lewis' voice came. Carl glared at him and snarled. "If I was ..." He began, but Mason cut him short. "Okay men, let's cross."|Rising Action|Even in distress, Carl refuses help from Lewis – pride over survival. Mason's interruption removes the last pause before the crossing, denying Carl any chance to reconsider.]]

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[[The next few seconds flashed; then he was knee-deep in foaming water. The rapids unleashed their full fury, and spray flew, and Carl felt himself stagger under the assault, and foundered.|Climax|"The next few seconds flashed" mirrors Carl's feverish disorientation and compresses the moment – the writer doesn't linger on the crossing, which makes the sudden danger feel more real.]] [[A cold hand grasped his wrist as he slumped to his knees; water, foam and spray flew as the big man, Lewis, hauled him over to the other side, to safety.|Resolution|The required phrase arrives here – and it is Lewis, Carl's stated enemy, who grasps his wrist. The story's conflict resolves through an act of unexpected loyalty from the last person Carl would accept help from. Nothing more is said; no reconciliation speech. The action speaks.]]

## The Daydream — 2007 (CXC Award Winner)

### [Code: annotated-example]

[Exposition] The story opens in the middle of an emotional crisis. The reader is given symptoms – guilt, shaking, walls closing in – without any explanation of why. This forces them to keep reading.

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[[Beads of sweat slowly trickled down my face, the numbing feeling of guilt stealthily creeping up my spine. I sat in my western looking living room on the cowboy patterned sofa, shaking from head to toe. |Exposition|The story begins mid-crisis. Physical symptoms (sweat, shaking) tell us the emotional state without naming it. The oddly specific "cowboy patterned sofa" grounds the abstraction of guilt in a concrete, almost absurd domestic detail.]] [[The dingy brown, the room had been painted, it seemed nauseating at this moment – or was it the fact that the walls of the room seemed to be closing in on me. "I wish they would," I thought. |Exposition|The cause of the guilt is deliberately withheld. The aside – "I wish they would" – is a darkly comic inward joke that deepens the character's dread without explaining it. The reader is hooked: why would she want the walls to close in?]]

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[Rising Action] A single transitional sentence smoothly shifts the timeline, allowing the writer to control when the reader gets the information.

[[My mind drifted to two hours earlier that day in my classroom. Life seemed less complex then. |Rising Action|A single sentence shifts the entire timeline. "Life seemed less complex then" is quiet irony – the reader, dropped mid-crisis in the opening, already knows the flashback will show exactly how it got complicated.]]

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[Rising Action] Zack is described entirely through Susan's admiring gaze, revealing her desire as much as her character.

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[[ "Come on Susan! There is no one here. Why can't you just this once kiss me?" My boyfriend Zack pleaded desperately with me getting more agitated with each second that was added to his wait. |Rising Action|Zack's pressure is the inciting force of the flashback. His increasing agitation – "getting more agitated with each second" – sets the clock running, and Susan must decide before it runs out.]]

[[My eyes admiringly drank him in from head to toe. "What was wrong with me?" I thought. Zack was expertly molded in every way possible and yet still I found it so hard to indulge in anything with him physically, because of fear of being caught. |Rising Action|Susan's self-questioning – "What was wrong with me?" – establishes the central tension: attraction pulling against the fear of consequences. This is what the whole story turns on.]]

[[His caramel brown skin seemed to seep all over him. He was tall, with full, luscious pink lips, breath-taking glassy black eyes, and curly dark hair. The desire in his eyes drew me in, like a fisherman reeling in his catch. |Rising Action|Zack is described through a series of specific sensory details – not generic "handsome" but precise colour and texture. The simile "like a fisherman reeling in his catch" subtly positions Susan as passive, being drawn in rather than choosing – which sets up her later failure of will.]]

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[Rising Action] Susan's resistance crumbles incrementally – each beat bringing her closer to the decision.

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[[ "Zack, you know physical contact at school is forbidden, and my parents have a lot to do with my not doing anything with you. If I was caught I could not bear to face their anger and disappointment." |Rising Action|Susan names her two reasons for resistance – institutional rules and parental authority. Articulating them here gives her resistance structure; it also makes their erosion in the next few lines more visible.]]

["I know Susan, but we've been together for three months. I'm sure this one time wouldn't hurt, and I promise we won't get caught."|Rising Action|Zack's reply dismantles each reason: duration justifies it, and the promised secrecy neutralises the fear of consequences. The logic is flimsy, but he delivers it with confidence.]]

[[I looked up at him questioningly, praying for the Lord to restore my sense of judgment, as I was on the verge of surrendering to him. As though sensing my wavering in thought, Zack leaned over onto my chair and placed his nose directly on mine. The scent of flower scented soap softly caressed my nostrils mixed with the baby powder smell it seemed of his youthful perfection.|Rising Action|The moment is rendered through smell rather than sight, which makes it more intimate. "On the verge of surrendering" is a loaded word choice – Susan frames the decision as a loss of self, not a gain.]] [[My heart hammered against my ribcage, almost arresting the air which tried in vain to enter my body. I leaned in towards him, and shakily pressed my lips against his. "What are you doing?!!" A loud, accusing male voice came crashing between Zack and me. I froze.|Climax|The kiss and the punishment arrive simultaneously. Mr. Forbes crashes in at the exact moment Susan makes her choice – structurally precise: consequence and decision are one beat, not two. "Came crashing between" is physical language – the voice intrudes like a body.]]

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[Falling Action] Forbes's intervention is deliberate and brief – he cuts off Susan's excuse mid-sentence and issues consequences without drama.

["Susan James and Zachary Elliott?!! This is totally unbelievable!" the voice continued. I turned reluctantly to face a tall, dark man, clad in a grey suit with a repulsive tie, staring angrily at me. It was Mr Forbes, our school Principal.|Falling Action|Forbes names both students – no ambiguity, no possibility of escape. The "repulsive tie" is a telling detail: seen through Susan's dread, even the ordinary becomes grotesque.]]

["I was ....., " I started to say. I was however interrupted by Mr Forbes. "Head home now, the two of you, and wait for me to call your parents."|Falling Action|The ellipsis of Susan's excuse signals there is nothing to say. Forbes doesn't argue or interrogate – he simply issues consequences. The economy of it makes the punishment feel final.]]

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[Falling Action]

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[[The phone rang once and stopped. It rang again. This was it now.|Falling Action|The required phrase snaps the reader back to the opening scene. The three short sentences – staccato, declarative – mirror the controlled panic of waiting for a call you know is coming.]] [[Like an alarm clock, all my nerves spiraled my body into an unhealthy vibration. My mind was jogged back to reality. I could taste the breakfast I had eaten that morning re-entering my mouth.|Falling Action|The physical symptoms echo the opening – sweat, vibration, nausea. The reader's body remembers the first scene; the return to it confirms that the consequence is coming.]]

["Susan!!" "Huh!!" I replied completely out of touch with everything. "Answer the phone!!" my mother bellowed from the kitchen.|Falling Action|Susan's disconnection – "completely out of touch with everything" – shows how thoroughly the daydream consumed her. Her mother's bellow is the first external voice to break through.]]

[[My stomach, rotated 360°, and knotted into a terrible bow. The phone kept ringing.|Falling Action|"Rotated 360°" is an unusual anatomical image that makes the dread physical and precise. The short sentence "The phone kept ringing" mirrors Susan's fixation – it will not stop.]]

[[ "Susan! Susan! ..... Susan!" My mind seemed to be playing tricks on me. The voice which kept calling my name seemed to be transforming into that of a male's. A hand tenderly rested on my shoulder and gently shook it. |Resolution| The shift from female to male voice is the clue planted before the reveal. The reader is given the information first, then the confirmation – the twist is earned, not sprung. ]]

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[Resolution] The entire flashback was a daydream. The reader must re-read the opening with new eyes.

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[[ "Susan, are you OK?" I turned to look at my enquirer, and to my surprise I was staring right into Zack's face. The school bell was ringing uncontrollably. "Susan, I just asked you if you'd kiss me, and you totally zoned out for about five minutes. Aren't you going to answer me?" |Resolution| The entire flashback was a daydream – Susan never kissed Zack. This recontextualises the opening: the guilt, the sweating, the walls closing in were all imagined. The reader must re-read the first paragraph with new eyes. ]]

[[ "Oh..... I don't think we should do that just yet. I have a funny feeling about the outcome." "But Susan, we've been ...." he started. "I know, but I'm not ready," I interrupted. "OK, I respect that" he replied, "I'll wait" – quite to my surprise. I hadn't expected this response. We got up from our desks and walked towards the door. "Huuuhhh!!" I was finally able to breathe. "Thank God it was just a daydream," I thought. |Resolution| The daydream functions as a moral rehearsal: Susan imagines the worst outcome and, armed with that knowledge, makes a different choice. The story elevates itself from a school drama to a quiet reflection on judgment and self-knowledge. Zack's respect for her refusal also subverts the expectation set up in the flashback – he was never the villain. ]]